

(By: Ron Harris and Deirdre Shesgreen) Not since 1916, when they chased revolutionary leader Pancho Villa near Mexico, have the Missouri and Illinois National Guard been called upon for duty on the nation's borders.

President George W. Bush's announcement Monday night didn't make it clear whether they will be returning to that role 90 years later. Nor did it, as the president and his political advisers had hoped, bring any more consensus nationally to the issue of immigration reform.

There was support and criticism of the plan by senators, representatives and governors, and it did not split entirely along party lines.

Rep. Jerry Costello, D-Belleville, said: "We need to see the details of the president's proposal, but I have long supported - and have voted for - using our National Guard and active military as part of the effort to secure our borders."

Even some of those who welcomed Bush's focus on border security, like Rep. Todd Akin, R-Town and Country, said it was a short-term fix and was unlikely to soften their opposition to Bush's more controversial call to grant legal status to illegal workers.

"What I'm interested in is not creating a system which rewards lawbreakers," Akin said. "That's my bottom line."

Worry about overuse

Costello joined critics who say the Guard is already overstretched from extensive deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in support of natural disasters such as Hurricanes Katrina and Rita last year.

"This is another example of where the \$8.1 billion a month we are spending in Iraq is affecting other aspects of our national security," he said.

The critics point to flooding in New England and brush fires in Florida that require Guard units and warn that using the Guard for border patrol could weaken its ability to respond to disasters, particularly with hurricane season approaching.

Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois delivered the Democratic response to the president's remarks, raising sharp questions about the toll Bush's plan would take on the Guard and the real numbers involved in such a deployment.

"Democrats are willing to support any reasonable plan that will secure our borders - including deploying National Guard troops," Durbin said. "But we don't need a military solution to break a political stalemate. We need political leadership. ... This cannot turn into another long-term military deployment with no clear plan."

Rep. Russ Carnahan, D-St. Louis, said: "There's a serious concern, especially in the environment we're in, about overextending our Guard capability. By really overusing the Guard, it's changing our security at home from helping us be protected from terrorist threats or natural disasters."

It would make more sense to increase the number of border agents and beef up technological surveillance, Carnahan said.

Missouri Gov. Matt Blunt declined to comment on the president's proposal until he learned more about it, a spokesman for the governor said.

Others said the president's plan is a political ploy to appease critics of the bill that senators began debating Monday, hours before Bush's speech.

That measure would beef up border security, but it would also establish a guest worker program and offer millions of illegal immigrants already here a path to citizenship.

The Senate bill takes a dramatically different approach than one passed by the House late last year. The House bill would make the estimated 11 million illegal immigrants now here felons, and it does not include any provisions for guest workers or citizenship.

While the National Guard has been used since the late 1980s to support state and federal law enforcement's drug interdiction efforts along both borders, it has been used only twice in 86 years to extensively guard U.S. borders against foreign intrusion.

After the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, about 1,500 guardsmen, mostly Air Guard members with helicopters, were used for six months beginning in March 2002 to monitor the borders of Mexico and Canada, said Lt. Col. Mike Milford, spokesman for the National Guard Bureau in Washington.

For 60 days in an operation called Winter Freeze during the winter of 2004-05, units were used again to provide helicopter surveillance of the border between Canada and some New England states, Milford said.

He agreed that the Guard has been stretched.

"We've been needed; we've been busy," he said. "But we've met every mission we've been asked to do, and we anticipate that we'll continue to meet any mission that we're asked to do."

But it hasn't been easy.

Help after hurricanes

When Hurricane Katrina swept through Mississippi and Louisiana, as many as 40 percent of the states' guardsmen were deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Tens of thousands of additional guardsmen from across the country were needed to help. Missouri sent about 1,000, and Illinois sent about 1,500, spokesmen from each unit said.

And many units sent in after Katrina didn't have enough equipment initially to do their jobs because, as is the military's practice, much of their equipment had been left in Iraq and Afghanistan for units that would be deployed there in the future.

Illinois, for example, left about \$40 million in equipment in Iraq, said Illinois National Guard spokesman Lt. Col. Tim Franklin. Its three transportation companies left behind its semi-tractor-trailers, and other units left scores of Humvees, he said.

The more than 50,000 Guard units that went to the Gulf Coast reported shortages of communication radios and vehicles that could drive through the waist-high floodwater.

Milford said: "We had to go looking around the country to other units to see who had the types of things we needed. But the equipment was eventually transported, and we did fine."

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